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ABSTRACT

The newsletter issue for parents of handicapped children looks at ways to help the handicapped child improve his self-esteem. Sections discuss symptoms of low self-esteem, patterns of behavior (such as withdrawal, acting out, avoidance, overcompensation, perseveration, and social immaturity); and ways to improve self-esteem including encouraging achievement and a sense of responsibility, listening to your child, and communicating your approval. Brief suggestions in the form of "do's and don'ts" conclude the article. (DB)

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Special Parent ★Special Child

Practical pointers for parenting handicapped children

VOL. 4, NO. 2 MARCH/APRIL 1988

RAISING YOUR SPECIAL CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM

The greatest gift parents can give their children is a feeling of competency and self-worth. Without a positive self-image, children as they mature are incapable of full achievement. Parental influence is perhaps the strongest factor in how a child perceives himself and the world around him.

Individuals who, as adults, find themselves plagued by self-doubt or a nagging sense of inadequacy are usually reacting to echoes of their past. Whether we realize it or not, feelings of being likable or unlikable, clever or dumb, lovable or unlovable stem from childhood experiences that began at our parent's knee.

The special child, because his limitations interfere with his ability to perform like everyone else, is in danger of a damaged sense of self-worth **right from the beginning**. Special parents, without meaning to, often reinforce a negative self-image and thus their special child becomes immobilized, unable to achieve at any level. In this issue we will focus on how to recognize the damaging effects of low self-esteem, and how to help the special child become a happier, more capable youngster despite his limitations.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Symptoms of low self-esteem

As a special parent do you often hear such unhappy comments from your special child as "I'm dumb, everybody knows it," or "My brain is damaged, that's why I can't do anything," or "Nobody likes me," or even worse "Why was I ever born?" These are all the telltale signs of a negative self-image. Observe your special child closely. Does he exhibit any of the following?

- Avoids new or challenging situations

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Suzanne Della Corte, M.S., for 15 years co-director of the school, is responsible for curricula, staff development and supervision. She is author of numerous research projects in the field and has edited psychology textbooks for a leading New York publisher.

- Fears new situations, even minor changes in routine
- Frequently refers to himself as dumb or stupid
- Is easily influenced by others, especially peers
- Blames others for his own mistakes
- Complains of being picked on or of being disliked
- Appears despondent
- Falls apart or acts confused when under stress
- Dislikes school or thinks his teacher dislikes him
- Can be alternatively belligerent or tearful
- Concentrates on one narrow activity to the exclusion of all others

Children who have such negative feelings as these or who feel inadequate about themselves often develop their own ways of coping. This results in **inappropriate patterns of behavior** which are readily observable and which, when they persist, can lead to further difficulties. Observe your special child for the following patterns.

Patterns of behavior

Withdrawal. Children who perceive themselves as unpopular or unlovable often isolate themselves from family and friends, spending long hours either in their rooms or idly in front of the TV watching programs at random. This self-inflicted solitude is a form of protection from being teased or hurt by others.

Acting-out. Often children handle their feelings of inadequacy by seeking attention in inappropriate ways. The class clown or over-talkative loudmouth who persists in irritating everyone around him, the child who appears to do anything for a laugh, is in reality the powerless child who will go to any length to have people take notice. Unfortunately, negative behavior garners the most attention and many special children will go to this extreme in their efforts to achieve a sense of identity. As one teacher describes this in a report card: "Johnny is an attention seeker. He responds to negative attention as much as positive. He will often act very immature and purposely do the wrong things. He has trouble sustaining good peer relationships, wanting to play, then quitting when things don't go his way. He seems to need a lot of confidence building, someone to listen to him more often and yet, firm, consistent discipline. We are trying to provide this type of environment and I hope in time he will respond."

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Avoidance. The special child who thinks of himself as incompetent will actively avoid anything he perceives as a challenge. He is so afraid of failure that he may refuse to go to school or develop irrational, immobilizing fears. In extreme cases he may even run away from home. The avoidant child is so fearful of doing things wrong that he may dawdle until the task is done by someone else. His attempts are always half-hearted and he prefers to talk endlessly about how and what he is going to do rather than engaging in the actual performance.

Overcompensation. Children who are insecure or who find the world confusing will try to overcome their confusion by selecting one narrow skill to the exclusion of everything else. Many special children are adept at mastering irrelevant information such as memorizing the weekly TV schedule or reeling off baseball scores and batting averages. Rote-memory activities are basically nonproductive but are often preferred by the special child because they are less threatening than more competitive hobbies and ventures.

Perseveration. Often the special child persists in doing the same thing over and over; he may for example work the same puzzle, read the same story or play the same game, refusing to participate in anything else. He finds comfort in one chosen activity where he finally has met with success. He is thus reluctant to go on to the next step or another activity that he thinks might be too difficult for him.

Social immaturity. Children who feel inadequate often gravitate toward younger playmates who are perceived as less threatening than more age-appropriate peers. The special child feels safer, less buffeted in this kind of environment where little is expected of him. Unfortunately, his level of play becomes fixed at a much younger stage and he often regresses to more infantile behavior entirely.

Ways to improve self-esteem

The first step in helping your special child improve his self-image is to **know your child**. Observe him closely without making comments. Then draw up an actual list of the activities he does well or seems to prefer and make a mental note of anything positive. Encourage any talent or activity he performs well. Mention it to him often and especially to others as this helps your child develop an awareness of his own merits.

Find out about his disability. By becoming an educated parent you will be able to find out precisely what your child's disability means in terms of what he can or can't do. In this way you will avoid frustrating your child by making unrealistic demands on him. Make sure your youngster understands that being different does not mean he is inferior or bad.

Encourage him to achieve within the context of his disability. A special child with impaired coordination, for instance, will only feel worse if his parents expect him to shine at baseball. This does not mean he can't be taught to keep score or gain pleasure and self-respect from becoming the family's scorekeeper when they attend sporting events or at home when they play games.

A sense of responsibility builds self-worth. Your special child should be given specific chores or take charge of activities that are clearly his. This could include taking care of a pet, buying the daily paper, bringing in the mail, table setting or napkin folding, for example. Let your own family's habits and preferences be your guide and be sure to assign tasks to your child that are based on what he is able to accomplish without frustration. Compliment him often for jobs that are well done. Building a sense of competency takes time and effort but is well worth it. Giving your special child the opportunity to **make choices** is another way of increasing self-esteem. Let him decide whether homework is to be done before or after dinner (as long as it's done) or whether bath time is in the morning or evening. Allowing him, for example, to make menu choices at home or in restaurants elevates his sense of importance. The child who is able to choose one activity over another is in fact learning how to make decisions and abide by them.

This is preferable to the demeaning position of many special children of always being on the receiving end of others' commands or preferences.

Listening to your child is a key factor. Stop, look and listen! Find the time when you are not preoccupied by daily chores or interruptions. Ask the telephone caller to call back if necessary. Even if it is for only a short period your special child must be given a sense of your **undivided** attention. By giving your child this gift of time you are impressing on him a sense of his importance and, above all, that he matters.

Concentrate on being a good listener. Your body language, facial expression and eye contact tell more than words whether or not you are really tuning in to what is being said. Establish an openness so that your special youngster can tell you what's on his mind. Ask yourself what your child is trying to say and what you can learn from what he is telling you. Don't dismiss what is being told as unimportant. Things that are seemingly irrelevant to you may be extremely important to your special child. Tune into his feelings, not only to his words. Is he happy, sad or mad? If you have established a framework of open and safe communication, you can find out things that might be troubling him. Resist jumping to conclusions or making judgments. If your special child comes home with tales of defeat or disappointment, don't deny those feelings exist. Acknowledge to him that everyone feels hurt or depressed at times. Share with him a similar story of rejection from your own past and how you surmounted your problems. Help him find appropriate ways to ventilate his feelings, especially if he has difficulty verbalizing. For example, have him draw an "angry picture" that describes how he feels.

Mention to him his positive attributes without overdoing it. Help your child feel important or successful even in the face of failure.

Communicate your feelings. Communication is more than the verbal exchange between parent and child. Remember that **touch** is a form of communication and bondedness and can work wonders. Your hand clasped over his, a reassuring pat on the shoulder, an affectionate smile, fond look or gentle stroke to your child's hair goes a long way to making your special youngster feel connected and wanted. These physical signs of bonding are extremely important to special children who find it difficult to form relationships with others.

Communicate your approval. When you approve of your child and his actions you are conveying to him that he is a worthy person, valuable in his own right. Your praise, in order to be effective, must deal with the activities your child engages in. Simply telling your child that he is "good" or what he has accomplished is "great" falls short of the mark. For example, instead of looking at a 100% spelling test and commenting "wonderful," why not expand on this accomplishment. Mention improvement in neatness, handwriting, the complexity of the words, etc. Hang the test paper up for all to see and approve. Make a concerted effort to use the language of approval whenever you describe your special child's activities. Sincere praise, given at the right times, validates your child's self-image and identity and encourages him to achieve even more. This does not mean you should patronize your child with insincere compliments. Overpraise has the adverse effect of making the child feel even worse about himself. Children withdraw or deliberately fail if they feel they cannot live up to the expectations of overpraising parents.

Keep in mind that sincere praise **dwells on the activity** and does not exaggerate the accomplishments.

A supportive family environment is the crucial element in making sure your special child feels he is a valuable human being capable of achievement. In the right setting **many** special children can and do develop a strong sense of their own self-worth.

Do's and don'ts

• **Don't compare** your special child unfavorably to his more proficient siblings. This causes unnecessary resentment and can contribute to withdrawal or frustration.

• **Do treat each child in your family as an** individual, making sure you focus on the strengths and talents of each one, not the deficits.

• **Do give your special child recognition** for things well done. Be honest. Special children are well aware when they are being patronized. Moreover, siblings often resent or ridicule overly enthusiastic recognition of their disabled brother or sister.

• **Do become aware of** your special child's level of functioning. Don't expect him to succeed at tasks that are beyond him. For example, "clean your room" is probably a meaningless command to a child with a language disorder. "Put the toys in the box" or "put your shoes in the closet" breaks the task down into an understandable sequence. Demonstrate to your child or take him through the sequence of events until you are sure he has caught on.

• **Do accentuate the positive** even if your child continues to make mistakes. Make sure your youngster understands what he is supposed to do.

• **Don't let your own doubts or** misgivings interfere with your special child's desire to try out new things. Your "can't do" attitude is crushing and conveys more than anything your feeling about the ineptitude of your special youngster.

• **Do remember discipline** needn't undermine your special child's self-image. Parents who take the time to discipline fairly lend a sense of organization to children who can't sort things out for themselves.

• **Do discipline without belittlement.** Refer to the behavior or criticize the action, **not** the child.

• **Don't use backhanded compliments.** Comments such as "congratulations, clumsy, you didn't spill your milk for once" are so damaging they are best left unsaid. It's better to acknowledge improvement approvingly such as "I like the way you are handling your glass of milk tonight."

• **Don't continue to do the things for** your special child that he has demonstrated he can do on his own. For example, dressing or undressing or feeding or picking up after your disabled child if he can manage these things himself encourages a clingingness and dependency that ultimately robs your child of self-confidence.

• **Do get it across that it's alright to make a mistake.** Erasers are placed on the ends of everyone's pencils for a good reason and your special child should be aware of this! Often, special children are so fearful of failing they become manipulative, developing "headaches" or "losing" homework papers, crumpling or destroying lessons whenever faced with tasks that are difficult. Make sure your special child knows that you are aware that many things are hard for him and that you appreciate his efforts.

• **Do allow your child to continue** to do things he has demonstrated he can do well. Encourage him to take the next step toward something more complex.